

VETERAN: Al Talbott
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JEANNE URBANEK: All right. Today is Tuesday, April 24th, 2012, and we are interviewing Al Talbott at the Illinois State Library. Al is 76-years-old, having been born on July 9th, 1935. My name is Jeanne Urbanek. I'll be interviewing Al.

Could you, please, state for the recording what branch of service you were in.

AL TALBOTT: I was in the Air Force.

URBANEK: And what rank were you?

TALBOTT: After four years of active duty, staff sergeant.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: Which was good. I spent an additional eight years in the reserves.

URBANEK: Awesome.

TALBOTT: And so I -- highest rank held was master sergeant.

URBANEK: Great. Where did you serve?

TALBOTT: Most of my active duty time was at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey.

URBANEK: What was your job assignment?

TALBOTT: Well, I was in the 32nd fighter squadron, FIS on the form, fighter interceptor squadron. The task at that point was that that command, air defense command, was tasked

for the perimeter defense of the continental US. So that's where your assignment was.

URBANEK: So did you see any combat?

TALBOTT: No. I had no opportunity to see it. My hats off to those that did, but, no, I didn't see any.

URBANEK: Did you receive any awards, medals, recommendations?

TALBOTT: I did but just the rank and file. I didn't list them. I'm not a bronze star guy or anything like that.

URBANEK: Can you share any?

TALBOTT: I don't even know what they were. There weren't that many good conduct medals, things like this. I wasn't involved. The Korean war had just wound down when I went in and there was no active combat going on.

There were other areas -- there were some missions that the Air Force had that ranked, you know, and got some medals because of being involved. I wasn't involved in them.

URBANEK: What years did you serve?

TALBOTT: 1955 I went in, January, for four years until January of 1959.

URBANEK: Did you do your reserve work here in Illinois or --

TALBOTT: No.

URBANEK: -- in another state?

TALBOTT: No, most of my reserve time was spent in Pennsylvania and, like I said, I was eight or nine years in the reserves there.

URBANEK: Is that where they stationed you or is that where you were living or had --

TALBOTT: When I first got out of the service, that's -- I was living in Pennsylvania.

URBANEK: Okay. Because I noticed on your sheet that you were born in Miami.

TALBOTT: Yes.

URBANEK: So I just wondered if you had just decided or had been transferred elsewhere and stayed because I know you said you were in New Jersey, so I thought you might have stayed in that area on purpose.

TALBOTT: I was a military brat --

URBANEK: Oh.

TALBOTT: -- if you have heard that phrase.

URBANEK: I believe we have heard that phrase.

TALBOTT: My dad was in the Air Force, and he was stationed in Pennsylvania, and so it was from Pennsylvania that I enlisted into the Air Force.

URBANEK: Was it because of your dad that you did?

TALBOTT: Yes, yes. I almost had created a nightmare.

While a senior in high school there were about four of us that went down to the Navy recruiting office. And three of us went into the Navy -- three of that four. I didn't. I told my dad and mom what I had done and what I was thinking about and I felt the Korean war was starting over again.

URBANEK: Oh, right there in your living room.

TALBOTT: So I didn't do that. I didn't join the Navy.

URBANEK: Let's talk a little bit about life on the base or were you on the ship? On a ship or a base?

TALBOTT: No, I was in the Air Force. We had the base.

URBANEK: Can you tell us a little bit about your life on the base? How was life with your fellow soldiers and officers? How did you guys interact? Did you -- well, go ahead with that one. Then we can get on and talk about the others.

TALBOTT: Well, remember this was back in the fifties. We didn't know as many things about the problems of integration as people would have you believe. We were fully integrated at that point with blacks. I had a black roommate and we had no problems at all. So I just put that upfront.

We had some fellas that came in from the Navy and reenlisted to join the Air Force. That's their story. I don't know how deep involved that story would be.

But it was good. On the base they had all of the

attributes of trying to keep us young folks happy. I played a lot of sports, played a lot of softball, occasionally had a beer, and then occasionally I would have another beer.

And but as far as the tranquility on the base everything was fine. I did have an encounter with a young man, I was a young man too at that time, and he came back -- I was sober, I had not been drinking or anything, but he had for some reason had too much beer to drink, came back into the barracks and started a big ruckus. And I guess he singled me out. And he pulled a knife. And so it was one of these uncertainties as to what was going on.

Well, everybody comes together in barracks' life and so there were enough people that got involved that he couldn't get access to me and I guess I was glad of that too. But they took enough testimony from all the people there so that unfortunately for the young fella -- and I'm not totally certain because he was either transferred out or just summarily discharged. I don't know. But that was the closest I had to combat.

URBANEK: And you never did find out what --

TALBOTT: No, no. I didn't have to testify at his court-martial or anything like that.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: They just took the testimonies from everybody

that was there. And I've never had a word with a fella before or anything like that. So -- so that's just an occurrence. That will happen but it's not everyday life.

But what, in my mind, was good that everybody came together. And I could have gotten hurt. But more importantly than that he could have gotten into a lot more of a jam, but it's just passing thing. Otherwise, the base in the fifties, technology was not like it is now, not by a long shot. We had fighter squadrons and we had jets, the F-86 sabre jet. And then we had the F-102 Delta Dagger I guess they called it. They were pretty fast. The 102 would break the speed sound, which was pretty cool back in the fifties, but I have got more computer power in my automobile than what they had then.

URBANEK: Oh, my gosh.

You had said -- going back a little bit, you said you played a lot of sports. I wanted to touch on that a little bit. As far as your sports and entertainment and opportunities for travel, what did you do to entertain yourself?

TALBOTT: What did I do to entertain myself?

URBANEK: Besides sports. What kind of sports did you play?

TALBOTT: Well, I played softball while I was there. I was married within the first year that I was in the service.

So --

URBANEK: Someone local or back home?

TALBOTT: No, she was from Pennsylvania.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: And -- so that -- that had me on the highway on the weekends quite a bit. Interesting, that I had no problems at the time, back in the fifties, hitchhiking from New Jersey to Pennsylvania. It was not uncommon to see that happen. You never would do it today, never do it today.

URBANEK: So your wife did not live at the base with you?

TALBOTT: No.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: No. And curiously when we came back from our honeymoon, I reported back to the base, and I had orders there to send me to Okinawa. And I went in to see the executive officer and I asked him, I said, there's got to be something. I said this is not a nice way to kill a honeymoon. And he looked at me a little bit startled and he said -- understand, he was an old man, he had to be 40 -- but he looked at me and said, son, are you trying to say you really don't want to go to Okinawa. I said no. He said that's fine. He said I can work something out.

As it turned out, there was another fella in the squadron that I didn't know about, but had the same background

and training in jet engines, but he got in -- in the wrong frame of mind, I guess, with another fellow's wife and so they were really concerned about getting him out of town. Okinawa seemed like it would be far enough away.

URBANEK: Way out of town.

TALBOTT: So that in a way I regret it because I -- it might have been fun going to Okinawa, but he had to get out of town, I didn't, so he was shipped out. And that was the only time in the four years that my name came up for --

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: -- transfer or overseas' assignment.

URBANEK: So you didn't do any other traveling or anything while you were in the service?

TALBOTT: No, no.

URBANEK: So you -- obviously you got to stay in touch with your family --

TALBOTT: I did.

URBANEK: -- regularly?

TALBOTT: Uh-huh.

URBANEK: That's wonderful. That is wonderful.

Did you keep any sort of a personal diary or journal while you were there?

TALBOTT: No, no, that was the last thing I had in mind.

URBANEK: Was it? That's what I wondered. I just wondered if, you know, how many people actually did that or in the form of letters back home or something. But you were able to get home quite often?

TALBOTT: Yeah.

URBANEK: Did you take any sort of a good luck charm or anything with you when you went or any memento, something from home, to keep with you at all times prior to the wedding ring?

TALBOTT: No. No, really didn't. Wasn't superstitious in that way. It never occurred to me to be concerned. I didn't shirk for wanting to go overseas, except at the time, and timing is everything. So that was it.

URBANEK: Oh, my gosh. I want to talk a little bit, too, about post-war, when you came home and stuff. But one of the things that they were kind of -- you know, people wanted to know if you had any of your memorable experiences that you wanted to share or -- besides the fight, the almost fight, is there anything else you want to tell us about before we go on to the post-war years? How was the food and did you usually have enough supplies?

TALBOTT: Yeah, we weren't short. The food was mediocre. It was in a chow hall. I know that was back in the fifties. I think my monthly income was about -- after I got promoted one time was about 72 dollars a month, but they gave me room

and board and my wife was, of course, home. And I can remember paying as much as \$30 to get somebody else to pull my share of KP duty, because everybody had to go over to the KP and pull your KP duty, wash pots and pans, stuff like that. It wasn't punishment.

URBANEK: That's what you had to do.

TALBOTT: It was part of the program. And -- but if it was competing when it came up on a weekend and I wanted to go back into Pennsylvania to visit my wife -- my daughter was not born until '57 -- so I paid -- \$30 was the most I had to pay to get out of working on that weekend to go back. But it's just barracks' life, you know. For that I don't get any -- I'm not looking for any recognition as a war veteran. Combat experience I am here by mistake.

URBANEK: In the war?

TALBOTT: No, here.

URBANEK: Oh, here to interview?

TALBOTT: Yeah.

URBANEK: Why do you say that?

TALBOTT: Well, because I think that there are so many people that have done so much in the military and those are the ones that posterity needs to address.

URBANEK: But, you know what, without the ones being at base and doing the work that needed to be done, everybody had

a job to do and it all tied in.

TALBOTT: Well, I agree with that. And I'm -- like I said, I came from a military family and I don't have any problems with anybody going into the service. It was time invested as far as I'm concerned.

But I was mentioning earlier that I had a neighbor who would have been a perfect candidate for this and had knowing the way it was, I almost would liked to have tried to resurrect memories of his experiences.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: And had I known there was a program like this I probably would have done it and submitted his name for recognition because he spent some time during the second world war and those are the guys that my hat goes off to. So --

URBANEK: We'll have to -- off the top of my head, I think you can do it posthumously.

TALBOTT: But I couldn't give it the same color and flavor that would have been done if I had known.

URBANEK: Exactly. But I wonder if there is any of his family around you or by you that you might know. I take it he's deceased.

TALBOTT: Yes.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: Yes. And I don't know --

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: Yes, he's got family. His boy, the last I knew, lived in Colorado. But I noticed that he was very reluctant to speak about any of his experiences in the second world war, and I gave him every opportunity, but it wasn't until about five years before he passed away that he really started sharing some of -- some of his insights.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: And those are good insights for this kind of a program. Mine are boring.

URBANEK: They're not boring. I find them all very fascinating. I really do.

You want to talk about -- let's talk a little bit about your post-war days. Do you -- did you get discharged with a general group, had the war come to an end, or had you just done your four years and it was time for you to go home for awhile and do you remember the day you were discharged and the feeling?

TALBOTT: Well, yeah, yeah, I do. The Air Force is parallel in many respects to the Navy. It isn't the same that you see now with army squadron being activated from reserves and the whole squadron goes, the whole squadron comes back, but every one of the individuals beyond that they have a date of enlistment. So their discharge dates come up not as a

group. Very few of them come up as a group. So when I was discharged, I was discharged one on one. And my dad was still saying I should stay in the service. I was saying that I have got a family that I'm raising and I wanted to get out and go back to school and give them a more stable environment.

URBANEK: Uh-huh.

TALBOTT: And so I did bid adieu to the Air Force. I was pleased that I was able to get the rank early. But I went back to school and I ended up getting a degree in electronics and went to work for AT&T, and worked there for eight years, and then a fella that I worked with was invited to come out here to Illinois and work in the telecommunications department, which was part at that time of General Services. And he is the one that put pressure on me to move out. So after putting him off for about 6-8 months, his fifth request, I agreed to move out here. So I left AT&T and came out here and went to work for General Services. And I was their chief engineer in the telecommunications division. And I have been here in Springfield ever since. I retired from the state 31 years. My kids are high school graduates and college graduates. So now I have got -- that young bride that I had in the Air Force I lost her to cancer. We were married 28 years. And I remarried and so the Brady bunch. So we have six kids. She had four and I had two.

URBANEK: My goodness.

TALBOTT: So now we have got six. They're all married and a lot of them are college grads. And most of them still in the Springfield or Illinois area but not all of them.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: It's been a good life and I think that it couldn't have worked out any other way. I was destined, I guess, to be in the Air Force and I was destined not to stay in the Air Force.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: My hats off to all of the military folks. It always has been. I just think that anybody that thinks that they can hide behind the fact that war is terrible -- because it is, it's absolutely terrible, but to be -- you can't be so naive to say that because war is so terrible that I won't have anything to do with war. That -- that doesn't make sense. People say that we shouldn't be -- it's like bully pulpit, as long as the camera is on I can talk.

URBANEK: Go right ahead.

TALBOTT: But I don't think that it's fair that some of the people of our country say that we can't be the police for the world, and I don't think that we should really be the police of the world, but I think that there has to be discipline, discipline from a family all the way through, and

I think the opportunity to be level headed and be in the military, if they remain level headed -- some of the things we read in the paper sometimes now we wonder, but --

URBANEK: Yeah.

TALBOTT: But I'm for the military. I think that -- I think they're -- they -- they invest a lot of their time.

URBANEK: I agree with you. I do. Let me ask you this, having been a military brat, as you call yourself, and coming up from that family, did any of your children follow in your footsteps, post or pre-Brady?

TALBOTT: No. I only have -- well, pre-Brady I have one son and he's a fireman here in Springfield. So, no, he didn't go in the military.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: Of the post-Brady bunch, my wife's oldest son was in the reserves, army reserves, for a number of years. And I guess his knees got too bad so he's not active anymore. But, no, they didn't -- I didn't try and lead them with the same fervor that my dad did, but I never -- I never discouraged them. I would never have done that. I mean war is hell, but I would not have discouraged my kids from going in the military, even during the Vietnam war and that's certainly one of the worse that we've been involved in in some time.

URBANEK: Did you join any veteran's organizations when you came back or later? Are you part of any?

TALBOTT: No, I'm not.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: And I went to join the American Legion.

URBANEK: Uh-huh.

TALBOTT: And at that time -- I don't know if they have changed their dates or not -- but they said, no, I wasn't able to join the American Legion because -- while I got the Korean GI Bill of Rights --

URBANEK: Uh-huh.

TALBOTT: -- I didn't satisfy the American Legion's membership on dates. They had something that said -- oh, it was back in -- I went in in January of '55. It was sometime back in, I don't know, maybe early '54 when the truce was signed --

URBANEK: Uh-huh.

TALBOTT: -- or the actual conflict stopped. And that's when they stopped taking people in. And I figured they didn't want me then so I'm not going to join them now.

URBANEK: Okay. I was going to say there's someone I could talk to and ask those same questions for you. I mean if you wanted to know if they changed their criteria.

TALBOTT: Well, I have always been curious about it

because I have heard some people say they have changed it and other people said no.

URBANEK: Based on the fact that my brother-in-law is in, I believe they have changed it, I do indeed.

TALBOTT: Well, there have been other windows of time because of the Vietnam war that came out, if you are a Vietnam vet, you could join.

URBANEK: Oh, okay.

TALBOTT: So, from what I understand, there's still windows in there that we're not -- not adequate for the American Legion. So --

URBANEK: All be darn. Do you keep in touch with any of your fellow base mates at the time?

TALBOTT: Yeah. Well, not in -- in close touch but I did contact one of my roommates that I had, and this is a guy that was at my wedding when I first got married.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: He was lanky -- Waylen L. Farmer is his name from Attella, Alambama.

URBANEK: Oh, my.

TALBOTT: He was 6'4" and I think he probably weighed about 195 pounds not -- not too stout. And my second wife and I went down to Alabama and looked him up, and this would have been, oh, my, maybe ten years ago, and I finally found him.

Made a lot of phone calls and found out where he was living. And I'm not sure I could even find his address. I might have it now, but I went down to visit him. Now, this -- he's still 6'4" but he probably weighed about 325 pounds.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: Big fella. I would not have recognized him for the world. And he saw me and he did recognize me. Of course, I had just a little bit more hair than I do now, and I had whiskers, which I didn't have at the time, but otherwise I'm about the same size I was when I was active duty.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: And we shared some neat experiences and just spent the day with him. There was no other activity from that at all, except we reminisced what we thought things was going to happen and what of those things did happen. It was neat. By in large, no, there's not a big fraternity of fellas in the military.

URBANEK: Okay. That's what I wondered if you had regular reunions or got together or anything.

TALBOTT: No.

URBANEK: Has your service in the military changed your perspective on anything? I mean did it -- how did it affect your life in any way? I know you said that you did not encourage, not necessarily not encourage, but you didn't push

your children to do that. Did it change the way you -- did you -- do you now look at military service like you did before you went in or is the -- your views on the military, which you expressed just a little bit ago, are because you served?

TALBOTT: I don't think my views changed at all.

URBANEK: Okay.

TALBOTT: I went in with an open mind in the military. I have got several uncles that were in the second world war. My dad was in the second world war. And I heard all of their their issues, the conflict, the battles they were in, and so I -- I didn't go into the Air Force because my dad told me to or wanted me to. It's just that I had been, as a military brat, on so many bases in Colorado and just moving all around, up to Newfoundland. I spent more time out of the country as a military brat than active duty. I was aware of military life and I wasn't afraid of military life and I cherished it.

I have no perspective that changed because of going in the military. I am pleased with the fact that I did go in. Would I have been pleased if my son had gone in? Certainly, but I not to the point that I would give him any demerits for not going in. When he was going to become a fireman that gave me more anxiety. Was he going to try to be a hero and go into a flaming building and get hurt, because certainly I'm concerned about that, but he survived that too. So --

URBANEK: Thankfully. That's good.

Well, Al, is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked you? Anything you would like to talk about?

TALBOTT: No, not really. I can't think -- my soapbox is probably getting slippery.

URBANEK: No, it's not.

TALBOTT: No, my hat is off to those those military guys that have done it. I think it's -- I think it's worthy of anybody's time. I found it as an investment. I don't know how it changed my attitude. I was raised in the south and I was always respectful, at least I think I was, and I know I had an english teacher who looked like Red Buttons, if you remember Red Buttons.

URBANEK: I do. Again, not as young as I look.

TALBOTT: He came to the high school and this was pre-air force, but he came to the high school and became our teacher, our adviser, class adviser. And I didn't know it until we had a class reunion, about the tenth class reunion I went back to Pennsylvania, and he said, Mr. Talbott, he says, I owe you an apology. I said why is that. He said because where he came from saying "yes, sir" or "no, sir" was not part of his vocabulary, nor raising the kids, and they were respectful, I assume he was, but he said I got so many "yes, sirs" from you

when he would ask for something and he said I thought you were just being sarcastic.

URBANEK: My goodness.

TALBOTT: And it got under my skin and he said I probably treated you differently than I would have treated you now. And I said I didn't have any problems with the way he treated me.

URBANEK: Wow.

TALBOTT: But I think that was the military bearing from my mom and dad and that's fine. So I went in with my eyes open and I came out still wide open. I think it helped say who I am.

URBANEK: I think that's great and I personally want to thank you on behalf of all of us for your service to our country.

TALBOTT: I like this program. But, like I say, I think there are a lot of good candidates out there.

URBANEK: Hopefully, as we do this, we will be able to -- and that's kind of what we would like to do is, you know, have people recommend someone, or whatever, just to get the word out.

TALBOTT: Yeah.

URBANEK: Because we love to have everybody's story.

TALBOTT: Yeah, yeah. To have the information there and

available to the rank and file, it would not be worth reading, but to have it -- to be able to look at some of those things -- you asked about a diary. I don't have a diary, but this would be so much better to be able to look and see what and how people thought, but I think it's a good program.

URBANEK: Thank you so so much for participating in it really. Well, thank you.

TALBOTT: Okay.